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The healing event in Graeco-Roman folk-medicine

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Summary The inexplicit character of Graeco-Roman folk-medicine, together with the distorted and haphazard nature of our evidence, has led to easy denigration of its aims and methods. Analysis of the structure of the healing event, especially its spoken component, the charm, provides some insight into tacit beliefs about illness, and into the skills through which folk-practitioners won reputations for competence. Just as in school medicine, the basic aim is acquisition of the authority to intervene: correct diagnosis, drawing upon folk-categories, is followed by the reassertion of order through setting the present contingency into the context of a natural law or regularity, drawing upon the stock of shared knowledge.

One fruitful way of conceptualizing the activity of ancient physicians has been to contrast them not merely with one another but with organized temple medicine on the one hand and magico-religious practitioners on the other.¹ But it is only in this comparative perspective that magical healing constitutes a unity. There were in fact five main kinds of Graeco-Roman traditional practitioner concerned mainly or partly with magical healing: diviner-healers, root-cutters, purifiers, exorcists, sorcerers, and numerous sub-types of each. These types of practitioner are only roughly correlated with different modes of healing: by divination, by simple application of *materia medica*, by incantation alone, by both together, by lustration, by phylactery or amulet, by counter-magic.² But whereas purifiers, exorcists and sorcerers could, if required, provide an account of the healing process because they had explicit, though very diverse, models of the cause of specific disorders acknowledged in their nosology (it is such a theory, for example, that the author of the Hippocratic treatise *De morbo sacro* ['On the Sacred Disease'] refutes),³ no such account seems to have existed for many disorders dealt with by root-cutters and diviner-healers. At this level of folk-medical practice, the nature of disorders and of the healing process was almost entirely implicit.

¹ Lloyd (1979) 10-58; (1987); Scarborough (1991); Edelstein (1945) 2, 139-180; Krug (1984); Jackson (1988).

² I exclude iatromagicians here, since they combined traditional healing methods with learned schemes, 'signatures' etc.; cf. Rothschild (1978).

³ Lanata (1967).

It is this implicit character, more than any other single feature, which stimulates modern enquirers to supply reasons and accounts. These accounts then become the raw material for a representation of the psychological and logical 'Other' that is magical practice. Two recent examples of this once standard procedure may be cited here. A well-known Greek and Roman remedy for haemorrhage was blackberries and mulberries.⁴ The *Cyranides* describes how to fashion an amulet against bleeding from the anus or from the upper part of the body by inscribing a 'Median stone' with the image of a *mormuros* (sea bream) and then inserting a mulberry bud pointing upwards or downwards.⁵ A new commentary on this passage observes:

'Once more the homoeopathic principle of the *similia similibus* is to be found in this amulet (...) popular medicine, seeing blood in the mulberry's colour, believed it would be helpful against haemorrhages. (...) According to magical logic the bud points at the opposite side so as to make the blood flows take another direction which will stop them.'⁶

It is scarcely necessary to observe that such ancient evidence as there is of the actual folk-representation(s) of the link between these fruits and blood⁷ has here been suppressed in favour of an assumption which makes folk-practitioners seem as arbitrary and indeed as silly as possible; and that the amulet is taken as intended to work directly, 'to make the blood (...) take another direction'. Yet for neither assumption is there any evidence; and in the case of amulets, plenty that points in a different direction.⁸

A second example concerns the use of *voces magicae* in charms. A recent discussion of Cato's charm for dislocations in *De agricultura* 160, which requires two such utterances,⁹ observes: 'Die geheimnisvolle Macht jener Wörter (oder Worte) liegt für den Abergläubigen in der Unverständlichkeit. Sie sind mit dem Zaubergeßtät vergleichbar, das sonst keinem sinnvollen, alltäglichen Zwecke dient.'¹⁰ This assertion rests not upon an analysis of the rôle of charms in Graeco-Roman folk-medicine but upon a conviction that 'superstition' must be absurd, and nothing is more absurd than unintelligible

⁴ [Hippocrates], *De mulierum morbis* 2.112 (8.242 L.); Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 23.137-139; Dioscorides, *De materia medica* 1.126.1 (1.115.9-15 Wellmann); *Cyranides* 1.12 (71.20-37 Kaimakis); Marcellus Empiricus, *De medicamentis* 31.33 (2.546 Niedermann-Liechtenhan²); *Additamenta pseudo-Theodori Prisciani* p. 356.2 Rose.

⁵ *Cyran.* 1.12 (71.38-72.45 Kaimakis).

⁶ Waegeman (1987) 97; much else in her commentary remains of value.

⁷ That is, Pliny, *Nat.* 15.97; 23.137.

⁸ Cf. Eitrem (1939); Barb (1953); (1964); Smith (1979); Ritner (1984).

⁹ There are also two alternative versions added by an ancient editor.

¹⁰ Önnersfors (1988) 115.

gibberish. It rests too upon a curious illogicality: if the power of charms resides in their unintelligibility, why are only thirty-nine of the 242 charms collected by Richard Heim of this type?¹¹ Or, to put the question in reverse, why are 84 % of charms on the hypothesis 'inefficient'?

The object of this paper is to examine the structure of the healing event in Graeco-Roman folk-medicine at the level of rhizotomist practice, paying particular attention to the rôles created within the transaction. Two preliminary points need to be stressed in relation to folk-medical recipes in the Graeco-Roman world. First, the selectivity of the information that has come down to us, principally in Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, Marcellus Empiricus' *De medicamentis* and in the corpus of horse- and mule-leechcraft, means that we have virtually no reliable account of a complete healing rite. We have instead reports at the nth documentary hand, which have been arbitrarily curtailed, edited and misunderstood.¹² Pliny himself acknowledges that he omitted most of the charms, including healing charms, that appeared in his written sources.¹³ We need to ask why so many of the charms reported by Marcellus, for example, are for self-help by the patient. Can that have been true of the tradition itself; or is it merely that the charms which were widely known and so available to the paradoxographical and herbalist¹⁴ traditions were those connected with illnesses and lesions generally considered treatable at home, by the head of the family?¹⁵ The great bulk of charms employed by individual practitioners, which may well have been more interesting than those we do have, must be lost to us.

The second point relates to the instability of the tradition itself, and its geographical variability. Theophrastus for example mentions a certain herbalist, Aretaphilus of Platea, who deliberately experimented with herbs which affected sexual potency.¹⁶ The diverse knowledge of individual herbalists, de-

¹¹ Heim (1892); Önnersfors himself has performed a useful service in adding 60 further texts ([1988] 129-136). Most of these, though, are early medieval; the only important text not known to Heim is the *Additamenta pseudo-Theodori*, edited by V. Rose in the same year, 1892; there is a sound commentary on the folk-medicine and the charms by Fahney (1913).

¹² Lloyd (1983, 135-149) notes the extent to which, between Aristotle and Theophrastus on the one hand, and Pliny on the other, reference to information provided first-hand by hunters, root-cutters etc. dwindles to vanishing-point. Pliny indeed remarks in a well-known passage how unfamiliar plant-lore is, known as it is only by ignorant and illiterate country-folk, and eclipsed by the splendour of medical controversy (*Nat.* 25.16; cf. Theophrastus, *Historia plantarum* 9.16.5).

¹³ *Nat.* 28.29.

¹⁴ In Singer's sense (1927).

¹⁵ I take it that the form of the do-it-yourself charm may be merely conventional, so that it need not literally be performed by the sufferer; that is, as a conventional form for a class of less serious conditions.

¹⁶ *HP* 9.18.3-11, one of the passages notoriously omitted without notice by A. Hort (Loeb Classical Library).

rived from experimentation and transmitted to their successors, must have led in the long term to wide divergences in lore between geographical areas and between different familial traditions of herbalism. The case of mulberries can again be cited: some remedies require a decoction of the juice, others buds, still others twigs. Each choice, once made, encouraged its own evocations, thus stimulating the production of still different remedies. Some charms, such as that against abscesses making use of the the plant *reseda*, are known to have been specific to a small area, in this case, Ariminum.¹⁷ Moreover, the principal means by which 'root-cutters' protected their claims to power, the rules for collection of plants and the parts of animals,¹⁸ were, seen as a whole, completely arbitrary; but in the practice of each individual they had an at least subjective meaning and an immanent structure of differences. Finally, it is clear that writing, and systems of knowledge, such as astrology, dependent upon writing, had an important effect upon the forms and usages of folk-medical recipes, and indeed came to offer the most important field for individual innovation and variation.

It is a commonplace that the social basis of healing is the establishment of the practitioner's authority to intervene.¹⁹ Although at the level of the physician and the sorcerer/exorcist it was diagnosis which played the crucial rôle, most disorders were self-diagnosed by the patient, who then had recourse to a scale of remedies, from those that were part of his practical knowledge – the least prestigious – to those provided by a practitioner. Root-cutters and diviner-healers had several ways of establishing the authority of their remedies: by asserting their natural effectiveness (rules about collection; some limited use of empirical experience);²⁰ by appeal to knowledge practices, such as writing, made prestigious by their remoteness; by use of standard building-blocks for rituals, such as performing actions three times – or seven or nine or some multiple of these, use of spittle, nakedness, fasting and so on, generally recognized as peculiar, serving to isolate the event as socially remarkable;²¹ and by use of an utterance, a charm. These four elements are the components of a special form of event, the healing event. The healing event thus does not comprise solely the healing ritual, since it includes the moment of collection, which may have been much earlier. But, for present purposes, I accept that the crucial moment is the point at which the practitioner intervenes to create a social situation between him- or herself, the patient and the disorder. Al-

¹⁷ Pliny, *Nat.* 27.131 (= Heim no. 49).

¹⁸ On plants, see Delatte (1961³); in Pliny, a good study by Martini (1977); there is no critical account of animal parts, but note Höfler (1908).

¹⁹ I omit here the special case of self-healing, which relies upon the authority of the system generated by folk-practitioners.

²⁰ Stannard (1982).

²¹ Rich comparative material in Wuttke (1900); Jungbauer (1934).

though the plant or animal remedy was of fundamental practical importance in the process of healing, socially the most important aspect of the healing event is the charm or utterance.

It has been observed that 'belief in the force and the perceived efficacy of magic is rooted in the perception that speech acts have power to disrupt and destroy, or to persuade, influence and convince others.'²² In the present context, we may usefully distinguish between charms and incantations.²³ One important difference lies in the degree of explicitness aimed at. Charms are typically allusive, pregnant, pithy, following the implicit rules of condensation and displacement. They are intended to be (over)heard but not (fully) understood. Incantation is explicit, discursive, more or less elaborated, obeying the implicit rules of specificity and concreteness. It is modelled upon ordinary religious prayer but is intended, unlike that form of prayer, not to be (over)heard because it could be understood only too well. This issue of explicitness is in turn linked to contexts of use. Charms were typically – but by no means invariably – orally composed, and orally transmitted, the property of (often illiterate) wise women and rhizotomists, and most frequently connected with the practice of healing. Although many were private property in the narrow sense of being secret, some were generally available within local healing lore, suitable for cases diagnosed by the patient as falling within his or her own competence. The implicit rules for creating charms also provided wise women and rhizotomists with schemes for constructing curses.²⁴ Moreover, the lore required for the construction of the typical discursive charm is drawn essentially from the shared encyclopaedia of common knowledge, while that required for incantation is a restricted knowledge, partly parasitic upon the legitimate speculations of official religious experts, and partly the secret property of a given magical tradition.

Very roughly, we may distinguish four types of charm in folk-medical contexts: addresses to a plant or declarations of intent; *voces magicae*; quotations or names from authoritative texts; and discursive charms. For the moment, only the last category concerns me. Discursive charms are those which bring contingent knowledge from the encyclopaedia to bear upon the healing event, such as a charm for helping donkeys urinate: 'Cocks drink but do not pee; "dormice" pee but do not drink'.²⁵ This alludes to two items of information,

²² Weiner (1983) 705.

²³ I do not follow Daniel (1975), cf. Daniel and Maltomini (1990-92), in using the term 'charm' for all types of operative magical discourse: we need terms to record the distinctions between folk-charms and ritual magical prayer.

²⁴ A curse within the local magical tradition, though heard, is typically veiled, allusive, disquieting rather than minatory, cf. Panthia's curse against Socrates in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* 1.13. It enters fully upon its linguistic status as a curse only when, on retrospective interpretation, it can be recognized for what it was.

²⁵ *Suda*, s.v. ἀλέκτωρ πίνει (1.100.31 Adler) (= no. 103 Heim).

one a fact, the other a 'factoid', in the encyclopaedia of more or less common knowledge, that birds cannot make water and that North African mice died if they drank water.²⁶ These particular rules have been selected because they are inversely symmetrical. It is normal for one sort of animal to ingest water but not to let it out again. It is equally normal for another kind of animal never to drink water, and to die if it does. The point is of course entirely tacit: we recognize these natural occurrences as anomalies because there is a rule, by implication a much more general and proper rule, that animals – quadrupeds – if they are to live must both drink and urinate. And a donkey is an animal that falls squarely into this class. So, by implication, 'Get urinating'. The allusion to the encyclopaedia conceals a directive that emerges from a process of classification.

Now although any given discursive oral charm is an anonymous folk-product, it is produced by learnable skills in just the same way as a folk-tale.²⁷ It so happens that the formal analysis of charms – modern (mediaeval) French healing charms – has attracted the attention of Tzvetan Todorov, whose account is in a number of ways suggestive for the study of the place of the charm in the Graeco-Roman healing event.²⁸ For him, a charm is best approached not as mistaken science but as an allocution, whose true addressee is the patient or client. If the practitioner overtly addresses the lesion or illness, that is a rhetorical technique.²⁹ His starting-point is that charms represent a subspecies of narrative, 'virtual narrative', rather like cooking recipes. To this end, they must establish rôles, actions and predicates. Charms as a class represent so many more or less complex transformations of a basic narrative sequence consisting of rôles, verbal actions, and a formula, what Todorov calls the 'incantation'. The basic rôles in the transaction are three: practitioner, patient/client, object. But the practitioner may be identical with the patient/client, and a mediator (a spiritual power) may constitute a fourth rôle. The function of the crucial verb, normally a directive – but, as in the example just cited, directives are often suppressed or tacit – is to establish a relationship of authority between practitioner and object (generally, the lesion or condition). It is through the directive that the practitioner asserts his right to intervene. Further verbs may

²⁶ 'Cocks' is non-specific, standing for birds in general. For the claims, cf. Aristotle, *Historia animalium* 489 a 1-8 (birds); 606 b 27 ff. and Pliny, *Nat.* 10.201 (mice). The Suda wrongly identifies *muxos* as 'dormouse'.

²⁷ Very roughly, about half of the approximately 85 surviving Graeco-Roman examples in Heim (1892, nos. 38-117) and Önnertors (1988, Appendix nos. 1-25) are expressly for oral use. But there must in the Graeco-Roman world as a whole have been many thousands, all constantly evolving variants.

²⁸ (1978) 246-282.

²⁹ In this view, I do not follow him, as will become clear below; but a psychological re-interpretation of the force of charms is well-nigh inevitable, almost certain to creep into any analysis at some point.

enlarge upon the aim desired. Finally, the formula, if it is present, marks the transaction as of a special kind – 'magical' for want of a better word. These linguistic features are usually reproduced in the accompanying ritual directions: charm and ritual 'say the same thing'.

To illustrate the relevance of such a formal analysis to Graeco-Roman charms, we may revert to the use of mulberries to stop bleeding, as in a very simple example from Marcellus Empiricus:³⁰

'On the thirteenth day and eighth hour of the (rising) moon, before the leaves of the mulberry come out or shoot, pick three leaf-buds with the thumb and "medical-finger" of your left hand and say over each one "Absi absa phereos". Put them into (two red dyes), tie them into a scarlet cloth and say, "Tollo te hinc totam, haemorrhoida, absis paphar, I remove you, haemorrhoid, entirely: be gone! paphar". Tie this to the patient as an amulet while he is stark naked.'

The extension of the healing event between the moment of collection and the healing ritual itself is here plain.³¹ The 'magical' character of the undertaking is marked in two different ways, by means of the ritual rules and the character of the utterances. The two reinforce one another: pleonasm is a basic figure of emphasis or insistence. The natural efficacy of mulberry buds is rehearsed by the practitioner along three different axes, of time, of procedure, of utterance.³² This event is linked to the ritual of healing itself – the determinate moment – through the use of a sound *absi* derived from the directive of the incantation proper, *absis*.³³ In the healing event, all three basic rôles are present: the practitioner and the object, the haemorrhoid, in the charm itself; the patient in the instruction about tying the amulet. The directive 'be gone!' – directives in charms range between direct imperatives and humble wishes, between threats and bargains – establishes the necessary relation of authority between practitioner and object,³⁴ intervening between the statement of purpose, 'I remove you entirely (from this patient), haemorrhoid', and an express

³⁰ *Med.* 31.33 (2.546 N-L.) = no. 41 Heim.

³¹ The detail of the moment of collection indicates the interference of calendrical schemes necessarily based upon literate techniques into folk-medical procedures.

³² Pliny, *Nat.* 23.137-38, an ancestor of the passage in Marcellus, mentions similar rules of time and method; but his most important rule is that the buds must not be allowed to touch the ground.

³³ Niedermann-Liechtenhan take *absis* as part of the formula, printing ABSIS PAPHAR (2.546.32, cf. Index of *Ephesia Grammata*, p. 812). Heim's text does not reveal what he thought.

³⁴ This type of direct injunction, at its simplest pared down to the utterance, 'I overcome you': *Hippiatrica Parisina* § 1093 (2.107.23-25 Oder-Hoppe), is one of the commonest rhetorical patterns of Graeco-Roman charms (cf. nos. 40-68 Heim).

marker of the relation of power set up between practitioner and lesion, *paphar*.

It seems to me quite unnecessary to suppose, as is often done, that the fact of addressing a lesion or illness implies a tacit theory of the cause, whether daemonic or other. As I have already observed, general or higher level explanations of the cause of illnesses seem not to have been current at the level of folk-medical practice, whatever may have been the case among iatromagicians, purifiers, exorcists and sorcerers. The address operates at two levels. As a locution to an inanimate object, it marks a non-standard social event requiring special interpretation. As an address in the second person, with the deployment of a specific name, it acts as a sign of the inclusion of the named within a quasi-social context. The feature of social contexts here singled out is the recognized rules of hierarchy, authority and deference. The crucial importance of the practitioner's acquisition of authority, through knowledge of the rules of collection, of the specific nature of simples, of appropriate rituals, but also of correct diagnosis, will now be clear. For if the name of the illness is not in fact the correct one, no quasi-social relation with it can be established.³⁵

But there is yet another aspect of the establishment of the practitioner's authority, to which I have already alluded in illustrating the notion of discursive charm. This is the technique that Todorov terms parallelization, the technique of comparison, sometimes explicit in the form of a simile, but generally indirect – achieved through metaphor (analogy), metonymy and synecdoche – which regularly occurs in such charms, both modern French and Graeco-Roman. The charm's most typical mode is the insertion of a present contingency into the context of a natural law or regularity, whether this natural order is stated expressly to be beneficent, as in the case of Christian charms, or whether the matter is left tacit, as with the great majority of Graeco-Roman charms. From this perspective, charms are to be understood as a specialised subset of the class of tropes available in a given culture. Knowledge of the real world, of the encyclopaedia, provides the resources for telling, pointed assertions of rule: by inventing, and secondarily by reciting at second hand, an apt charm, the practitioner asserts familiarity with a world enruled. By implication, the lesion or illness has destroyed an aspect of that order, which the healing event seeks to re-establish partly by the use of naturally powerful simples, partly by the construction of a special kind of social situation.

The instance of rule need not be made explicit at all. One common type of folk-remedy involves the transfer of a lesion or illness from the patient into another creature or the earth, as in the well-known case of the charm for gout or podagra cited by Varro from the early first-century agricultural writers Saserna (father and son): 'My mind's on you – make my feet well; let the earth

³⁵ Here we may assume there to have been a negotiation with the patient's own view.

take the pain, and my feet not complain.'³⁶ Here the tacit appeal is to the image of 'limited good', the classic peasant belief that goods, and specifically in our context health, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply.³⁷ The corollary of this belief is that an individual or family can only improve its position at someone else's expense, by depriving someone of the good in question. In the healing events involving transfer, the acquisition of health is treated in precisely this manner, as a limited good: what is to 'remain' in the speaker's feet is a quantum, *salus*, health. If health is a limited good, its acquisition through magical healing must be at someone else's expense. But that would be tantamount to witchcraft; a substitute 'person' is found, usually an animal, but here a classificatory living creature, the earth, so that the circle of deprivation can be broken – or rather, the parade of transfer to the animal world enables the patient to get well with a good conscience.

The knowledge alluded to in charms need not be taken directly from the real world. One of the commonest resources of Graeco-Roman charms is the proverb or catch phrase: here the authority appealed to is not so much an empirical fact or factoid in nature as the wisdom distilled in the proverb or phrase. The link between occasion and underlying rule is here often very weak; and the same is true of actual or implied narratives, *historiolae*, by which the (imputed) past is established as a normative parallel to a present instance. Weakest of all is the appeal to a named mediator: it is all very well to invoke Perseus holding the Gorgon's head, as an amulet against podagra in St Petersburg does, but what connection has Perseus with gout?³⁸ We may at this point invoke another of Todorov's points, that of transformation. The notion of transformation is suggestive in relation to (healing) charms because, despite a wide diversity of syntagmatic structure, they often do seem to share thematic and structural elements. The family resemblance between healing charms, and the frequency with which the same patterns of appeal recur, are, we may suggest, a consequence of a constant process of slight innovation and adaptation of thematic structure in relation to the encyclopaedia on the one hand, and ready-packaged cultural goods on the other. But we can also press the notion a little further.

In the full or explicit type of charm the *voces magicae*, if present, are one among several means of marking the special status of the utterance, designating the power relation which the charm sets up between practitioner and object. But there are many cases in which only this formula survives: there is no discursive charm. We may say that this marker enters into a synecdochic relationship to the full charm, standing for the rôles, directive verb and the

³⁶ 'Ego tui memini, medere meis pedibus: terra pestem teneto, salus hic maneto [meis pedibus],' (Varro, *De re rustica* 1.2.27); cf. Tupet (1976) 172–174. This of course is a self-help charm, of low efficacy. As Önnertfors (1988 122 f.) remarks, rather few surviving charms relate to this type of healing event.

³⁷ Foster (1965).

³⁸ Bonner (1952) 43; 76.

comparison, to all of which it tacitly alludes. Sometimes the prescribed ritual gestures and/or the character of the *materia medica* employed can be thought of as representing a suppressed discursive utterance. As an example, we may take a remedy for a running eye, again from Marcellus:

'If you suffer often from blar-eye, dig up the plant *millefolium* complete with the roots and make a ring out of it, so that you may look through it. Say "Excicum acriosos" three times. Move the ring down to your mouth three times and spit through it. Put the plant back into the ground. If it grows again, the user will never again suffer from eye trouble. Do it with both eyes. If the plant does not revive, repeat the performance with another. Take care that the plant is not plaited too tight, to help it to grow again when it has been put back into the ground.'³⁹

The implicit rôles, with practitioner the same as the patient, and the object, the eye, represented by the ring formed from the stems of the plant, are clearly enough present. The ritual of spitting functions here, as usual, as a marker of the magical performance in healing charms, strictly analogous with the formula itself, as is plain from the parallelism set up by the requirement to speak and to spit three times each.⁴⁰ The injunction, the statement of what is required, is left entirely implicit. Although there are several plants with the name *millefolium*, it is probable that this remedy refers to the one said by Pliny to like marshy ground and to be good for strangury (*dysuria*).⁴¹ The notion 'gets rid of water' has grounded a ritual which is strictly inappropriate, since strangury involves difficulty in passing water and *lippitudo* (blar eye) involves water constantly pouring from the eye. A link between the water-extracting plant and the patient is set up in three ways: by making the stems look like an eye; by suggesting an analogy between this circlet and the pursed mouth; and by the act of spitting through the circle. Since the alteration to the plant is explicitly left in the plant when it is put back into the ground, it is clear that the analogy is supposed to endure as the plant continues to grow.

Neither of the traditional explanations of such rituals seems appropriate here. It is hard to see how 'magical' power – the *mana* so beloved of nineteenth-century explanations of magic – can be considered to pass from plant to patient. There is no physical contact between eye and plant. Similarly, there

can be no question of a transference of the disease to the plant, since in such cases the creature dies or shows signs of the disease: the survival or death of the plant is merely a sign of future freedom from blar-eye or the reverse. Rather, the charm is grounded upon the natural property of the plant *millefolium*.⁴² The establishment of a metonymic and metaphoric relation between plant and eye creates a situation in which the relevant feature of the plant, its ability to get rid of water from bodies, is brought into play and by implication stated as a rule applicable to the present case of blar-eye. Granted all this tacit work, the utterance of the *voces magicae* retains the status of marker that it has in the discursive charm.⁴³

Although, given the nature of our sources, it is difficult to be sure, it seems probable that rhizotomists came increasingly to substitute a purely linguistic token, the *voces magicae*, for a discursive charm and accompanying ritual. 'Pure' formulae offered one signal advantage: they simplified and routinized healing procedures. The invention of verbal formulae held to be effective irrespective of the person of the healer amounted to permission to by-pass or abandon complex ritual requirements and knowledge of herb-lore. Routinization of this type was admirably suited to the problems and social contexts encountered by rhizotomists in towns, where the market in medical treatment – that is, the competition – was much more highly developed than in the country-side. Dominance by the formula is associated particularly, though by no means exclusively, with writing, which made possible a more intimate and durable relation between incantation and patient than was available to the illiterate healer, through the medium of the inscribed or written amulet.⁴⁴ The ultimate expression of this tendency is the amulet containing no herbal remedy but bearing non-linguistic sigla, a resource which is only thinkable within the context of literacy.

The price of this tendency towards routinization must have been that attitudes towards such charms became quite instrumental: they would be tried without particular expectation of success. No one, for instance, can have set much store by two known charms to stop nosebleeding: *Surgur*, to be spoken into the left nostril if the right nostril is bleeding; or *Fix fix fixon* to be spoken into the ear.⁴⁵ On the other hand, since many charms are for problems that

³⁹ Marcellus, *Med.* 8.64 = no. 181 Heim.

⁴⁰ It is possible that the utterance of the formula on each occasion is to be directly followed by spitting. But if we consider how common threefold expectoration is in magical healing, and in other related contexts, the interpretation in the text is perhaps preferable. The alternative would require e.g. 'ter dicat (...) et ad singula expuat' (cf. Marcellus *Med.* 15.105). It is also possible, though I think less likely, that the spitting is a ritual demand for water to leave the eye/eye'.

⁴¹ *Nat.* 24.152.

⁴² Pliny describes the stems as like those of fennel but soft, which suggests that the plant was conceived as sucking up water.

⁴³ A similar analysis of Cato's charm for dislocation (*Agr.* 160) could be made.

⁴⁴ The relationship is most simply indicated by the fact that of the thirty-nine healing charms consisting only of *voces magicae* cited by Heim (1892) nos. 178-213, twenty-two (56%) are to be written, seventeen uttered. All but one of the spoken examples derive from Marcellus, and are written in Roman characters; for one however Greek letters are employed (10.69 = no. 188 Heim). No doubt the prestige of written forms influenced oral charms.

⁴⁵ *Addit. pseudo-Theod.* p. 276.10-11; 23 Rose (= Önnersfors 1988, 130 nos. 8, 11).

often cease spontaneously, such as non-specific internal pains, nose-bleeds, headaches or bones stuck in the throat, recourse to any of them might on occasion be followed by success: the folk-medical remedies never specify a time scheme. From the point of view of the system as a whole, it was sufficient for there to be many remedies for similar ailments. If mere number is the main requirement, paronomastic utterance is the simplest renewable source of charms.

The character of our sources for Graeco-Roman folk-medical practice means that it is well-nigh impossible to investigate the kinds of problem routinely addressed by modern ethnomedical studies. Even such elementary questions as folk-perceptions of the causes and identification of disease, the social and moral aspects of disease, the meaning of illness to sufferers, and the grounds for positive and negative judgements of different types of practitioner, and different individuals, can hardly be tackled with the subtlety and nuance required. This paper has suggested that a study of the formal structure of charms may throw some indirect light both on tacit beliefs about lesions or illness and on the skills by which practitioners, wise women and herbalists in particular, acquired a reputation for competence. Although it is obvious that ancient folk-medicine, unlike its modern counter-parts, was not undercut by a major threat, such as free access to clinics of pharmaceutical-based Western medicine, it was by no means a timeless, unchanging practice. The most fateful borrowing from the dominant world was not from school medicine – indeed, the transaction in the case of herbal treatment went in the opposite direction.⁴⁶ The introduction of writing into rhizotomist practice can be seen as an advance into decline, as the purely marvellous aspects of magical thinking took precedence over more restrained, 'traditional' tacit representations of the healing event.

⁴⁶ Cf. Stannard (1961); Goltz (1974); Scarborough (1982).

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Tatian's 'rejection' of medicine in the second century

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Summary The question why Tatian, often misrepresented as an opponent of medicine *per se*, chose to condemn *only* pharmacology, has never been directly raised. His conviction that *pharmakeia* was a demonic lure can only be explained in the context of both popular and medical attitudes toward drugs. The basic meaning of *pharmaka* ranges from sorcery to poison to medicinal drugs. Some people regarded them as *categorically* similar to substances used by brute beasts to cure themselves, a minority of physicians refused to administer them at all, whereas many revered them as virtually divine, 'hands of the gods'. Hence, in Tatian's view, they were spiritually dangerous for Christians.

Tatian, a second-century Syrian convert to Christianity, was an apologist best known for vitriolically denouncing pagan culture, who was himself denounced as a heretic.¹ The dates of his birth and death are unknown. His *floruit* is generally given as 160-180. It is certain that he spent some time in Rome as a student of Justin Martyr. Around 172 he returned to Syria where he is supposed to have founded an ascetic sect known as the Encratites, who later were declared heretical for their rejecting marriage, the eating of meat, and the drinking of wine, and for aspects of their theology that bordered on Gnosticism. Because of his later association with Encratism and his rigorous denunciation of virtually all features of pagan culture while still within the orthodox community, he remains a controversial figure.²

Tatian appears to have been a rather prolific writer. Only two of his works, however, are extant, one of which is the *Oratio ad Graecos*.³ The *Oratio* belongs to the genre of Christian apologetics. A feature that was common to the genre

¹ E.g., by Irenaeus, *apud* Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.29. Irenaeus accuses Tatian of denying that Adam was saved, fantasizing 'about invisible aeons' and repudiating 'marriage as being depravity and fornication'.

² Several specialized studies, or at least portions of broader works, are devoted to Tatian. Grant (1954) and (1988), Elze (1960), and Barnard (1968) provide a good starting point. Daniélou (1973) furnishes very profitable analyses of Tatian's place in various aspects of early Christian thought.

³ Several editions of the Greek text and translations into modern languages are available. I shall follow the edition and translation by Whittaker (1982). Several studies of the *Oratio* are worth perusing, especially those of Hawthorne (1964), Osborne (1969), and the introduction and notes in Whittaker (1982).

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